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## Leadership and Gender: School Counselors' Experiences of Girls' Leadership in Secondary Schools

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### Abstract

There has been a proliferation of girls' leadership programs to stymie the leaking pipeline of women's leadership and resulting gender leadership gap. School counselors are advocates and change agents in the schools and play a key role in student development and leadership programming. School counselors' training in their counseling programs may impact their support and assessment of girls' leadership programming. This phenomenological research utilized the open-ended questions of an online survey to understand school counselors' experiences of girls' leadership. The themes, (a) Formal Approach to Girls' Leadership, (b) Informal Approach to Girls' Leadership, (c) No Girls' Leadership, and (d) Non-Gender Specific Approach to Girls' Leadership were discovered. Themes are discussed and suggestions for school counselors and counselor educators are offered.

### Keywords

girls' leadership, leadership development, school counselors

Gender persists as a defining influence on an individual's income, employment, social position, and other important socioeconomic determinants (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.). Though there has been progress in closing the gender gap in the U.S. in areas such as educational and career attainment (Weissbourd & Making Care Common Team [MCCT], 2015a) and family life and division of labor (Barnes, 2015); disparities persist in these areas. For example, although women are achieving higher paying and more prestigious careers, they continue to be overrepresented in lower paying, less prestigious positions such as administrative assistants and elementary school teachers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Further, one notable and persistent gender gap is with women in leadership positions. Women are underrepresented in congress, accounting for only 20.6% of its members (Center for American Women in Politics [CAWP], 2018), and in business and management, accounting for only 14.6% of the top five leadership positions and less than 5% of CEOs at Fortune 500 companies (Warner, 2014). Minority women, specifically women of color, are even more underrepresented in these leadership positions (Warner, 2014). Women's inability to achieve socially and economically advantageous careers, as well as gain fair representation in politics, can put girls and women at a disadvantage as these roles impact policy, legislation, economic power, and individual agency.

In addition, although leadership is frequently associated with a formal position of power, it can also be viewed as a skill set that can be learned and used for addressing complex problems (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). In this respect, leadership skills are not only needed to achieve formal leadership positions, but also to be an effective problem solver and change agent within one's own life and the environments in which one works. Thus, leadership skills are important to all girls and women, regardless of their career or political aspirations. Additionally, women and

girls benefit from gender specific (i.e., women's only) leadership development (Brue & Brue, 2016; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). At the same time, numerous girls' leadership programs have emerged over the past few decades (e.g., Girls Inc., Girls Empowerment Network, Girl Up, Girls on the Run) often delivered in the school system, as they target girls and teens in an effort to impart leadership skills early in development (Iachini, Bell, Lohman, Beets, & Reynolds, 2016).

School counselors have a key role in the types of developmental programs/services offered at their school, and they are a vital source of guidance in terms of career aspirations (Shapiro et al., 2015). Additionally, it is the position of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2015) that school counselors address and promote gender equity through their language, expectations, communication, and presentations. Given the importance of girls' leadership development and the vital role school counselors play in student development (ASCA, 2012; Erford, 2015) and gender equity (ASCA, 2015; 2016), study of school counselors' experiences with girls' leadership development is important for addressing the leadership gap.

### **Influences on the Leadership Gap**

Leadership development can be beneficial at any age, however, some of the effects of gender socialization may prematurely bias girls against leadership. As part of overall development individuals learn and adopt gender roles which are imbedded with culturally prescribed expectations for gender behaviors; the process is referred to as *gender socialization* (Fulton, 2017). *Stereotypes*, or generalized assumptions about attitudes, traits, or behavior patterns of men and women (Brannon, 2008) often inform expectations for gender roles. Gender socialization can impact girls' leadership in many ways including their political aspirations (Lawless & Fox, 2013), belief in their ability, ideas about what constitutes a leader (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017), overall confidence and confidence as a leader, and career pursuits (Shapiro et al., 2015). Gender

expectations can inadvertently direct girls' and teens' choices during secondary school which, in turn, can impact college education, career paths, and earning potential (Bian, Leslie, & Cimpian, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2015).

Girls' leadership may also be thwarted by biases, sometimes held by boys, parents, and girls themselves, that favor boys as leaders (Lawless & Fox, 2013; Weissbourd & MCCT, 2015a). For example, teen girls and boys can be biased against girls as political leaders and tend to award power more readily to boys; this is potentially related to competitive feelings among girls, lack of confidence and self-esteem, and stereotyping (Weissbourd & MCCT, 2015a). A bias toward boys as leaders is not surprising given that traits associated with traditional leadership align with societal views of stereotypical male traits, such as being competitive and rational, rather than stereotypical female traits, such as being nurturing and expressive (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Teachers and school counselors can also behave in gender biased ways by steering girls away from male dominated fields and perceiving girls as less able in math (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008). Teachers, the curriculum, school environment, and peer dynamics also impact gender socialization, and in turn, can impact girls' likelihood of pursuing varied careers and leadership roles (Shapiro et al., 2015).

### **Girls' Leadership Promotion and Intervention**

Although schools and school counselors may lack the resources for gender specific programming, given stereotypes and biases, intentional and tailored efforts are needed to support girls in their educational, career, and leadership endeavors. Haber-Curran and Sulpizio (2017) recommended girls' leadership development involve defining leadership as developmental (versus an innate trait) and independent of a formal, leadership position. In other words, girls need to hear the message that they can engage in collaboration and change regardless of position. This is important as girls will tend to be more interested in leadership when it is identified as something

inclusive and empowering versus a more masculine command and control approach (Baric et al., 2009). In addition, girls may need support to find and use their voice, learn ways to address issues of power, and develop their self-esteem (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). Baric (2013) noted competencies for girl leaders includes confidence, asserting one's voice, decision-making ability, organizational ability, and knowing why and how to motivate others. The issue of voice assertion (Baric, 2013; Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017) is particularly important given that girls often face the dilemma of whether to be self-affirming or to restrict their voice to avoid conflict and preserve relationships (Choate, 2008).

Girls may also need girls-only leadership training environments to overcome gender biases and gendered messages (Shapiro et al., 2015) that limit their ability to perceive themselves as leaders or view leadership as a positive endeavor (e.g., Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008). Further, there is evidence that girls-only leadership programs, such as Girl Scouts, can increase self-confidence, expand career choices, and counteract gendered messages (Shapiro et al., 2015). Participation in Girls Scouts has also been associated with a stronger sense of self, positive values, better grades, interest in STEM careers, healthy relationships, and community problem-solving (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2017). Finally, girls and women need role models and mentors to help them navigate leadership endeavors as well as overcome barriers to pursuing and succeeding in leadership (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). Tailored interventions and mentorship are important to addressing the commonly noted metaphor of the leaking pipeline to leadership among girls and women. Schools, a significant agent of gender socialization and student development, are a key target for intervening and promoting girls' leadership development. More specifically, school counselors are in a unique position to address the consequences of gender socialization given their role in student development (ASCA, 2012), career planning (Shapiro et al., 2015), programming,

and promoting gender equity (ASCA, 2014). What is unclear, however, is how school counselors view their role with respect to girls' leadership, whether they perceive it as important, and whether they are adequately prepared by their counseling programs to address the topic.

### **School Counselor Preparation**

Despite the deeply entrenched and salient nature of gender, most counselor training programs offer little guidance or education related to the role of gender in counseling (Choate, 2009) even though specific course work on girls and women is highly valued by students (Schwarz, 2017). Although there is evidence that school counselors can have gender-based bias (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008) and there are recommendations that school counselors focus on gender equality (ASCA, 2014), there are few recommendations for school counselor training regarding these issues. The leading accrediting body of counseling programs, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), does not mention gender in the school counseling specialty area (2016). This leaves school counselor training programs little guidance to address gender-based bias, except in the areas of multicultural counseling and competence. The degree to which multicultural counseling courses address gender specific issues as opposed to other aspects of identity is unclear (Pieterse, Evans, Risner-Butner, Collins, & Mason, 2009).

Further, girls' leadership programs are a common means for addressing girls' leadership, and therefore, the ability to identify existing programs, develop new programs, and evaluate their effectiveness is an essential skill set for school counselors. In fact, school counselors are required to provide data-driven programs and to assess the services they provide (ASCA, 2012). Training standards require that school counseling students learn the "evaluation of school counseling programs" and the "use of data to advocate for programs and students" (CACREP, 2016, p. 34). Thus, assessment is an ongoing part of school counselors' jobs and a required part of their training.

School counselors must not only recognize the need for girls' leadership development, but also have the tools to support and assess related programs and services. Because study of girls' leadership development is limited, and school counselors are called to ensure gender equity in their schools, their experiences with girls' leadership programs and services warrants investigation. Therefore, this research was conducted with school counselors regarding girls' leadership in their schools.

Using qualitative methodology, the purpose of this study is to understand school counselors' experiences of girls' leadership with a focus on girls' leadership promotion, school counselor training in girls' leadership, and assessment of girls' leadership programming. Phenomenological methodology allows for the exploration of participants' experience of a phenomenon, and therefore, was the framework utilized to explore the research question. The research question used was, "What are school counselors' lived experiences with girls' leadership in their schools, their training to deliver girls' leadership programming, and their assessment of that programming?"

## **Method**

### **Phenomenological Approach**

A phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) was used for this study as the aim was to understand the experiences of school counselors with promoting girls' leadership in secondary schools. Researchers utilize phenomenology to understand phenomena that has not been explored from the perspective of those experiencing that phenomena. School counselors' experiences and views on girls' leadership is an area that has not been previously studied and phenomenology allows researchers to explore that phenomena from the perspective of the participants (i.e., school counselors in secondary schools). Phenomenology often, but not always, involves interviews

(Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). In this research, open ended questions, provided to a large number of participants, were utilized to attain the depth and breadth of information usually found in interviews. In learning about the school counselors' perceptions and doing so in a way that allowed themes to emerge from data, the researchers aimed for insight about how girls' leadership is regarded and addressed within educational settings. The open-ended phenomenological questions were included with a survey as part of a larger study.

### **Participants and Procedures**

A random sample of secondary school counselors was identified from a database of Texas secondary schools via the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). The schools were randomized using a random number generator in Microsoft Office Excel. School counselors were contacted using their public district email address listed on their school or district website. Based on the NCES database, there were 3,346 secondary schools in Texas; however, schools within correctional facilities, disciplinary schools, and other specialty population schools (e.g., schools for teenagers who are mothers or expectant mothers) were eliminated as they do not necessarily represent the typical school. Schools with fewer than 50 students were also eliminated because they may not have leadership development requirements and resources typical of the average school. Many of those smaller schools did not have school counselors or school counseling programs and other programming was also restricted. This was confirmed through school websites, when available. Using the remaining 3,226 schools, a random sample of 1,697 schools were identified, however, not all schools had a designated school counselor nor an available or working email address. In the case of multiple school counselors per school, one was randomly chosen to participate. This random selection was made using a random number generator via Microsoft Office Excel. This resulted in a survey distribution of 1,571 of which 280 were returned for a

17.8% response rate. Using Tailored Design Method (TDM; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2008) school counselors were sent an initial notice of the study followed by four rounds of email recruitment, all personalized to increase participation. Each of the emails indicated that the research was about their (the participants') experience with girls' leadership programming and services. Participants were offered access to a document of girls' leadership activities as incentive for participation (Trespacios & Perkins, 2017) and were provided with a link to the survey created by the authors, which included the open-ended phenomenological questions. Participants self-selected to participate knowing the topic of the research. Those included in this research also completed the qualitative questions, resulting in 240 responses to qualitative question one and 214 responses each to qualitative questions two and three.

Respondents were mostly female (96.2%) and Caucasian/White/European American ( $n = 155$ , 64.9%). Other racial/ethnicities were reported as African American/Black ( $n = 33$ , 13.8%), Hispanic/Latino/a ( $n = 45$ , 18.8%), Biracial/Multiracial ( $n = 1$ , .4%), Native American/American Indian ( $n = 2$ , .8%), Asian or Pacific Islander ( $n = 1$ , .4%), and Other ( $n = 2$ , .8%). Years of experience as a school counselor ranged from less than one year to 47 years with an average of nine years of experience. Additionally, 95% of respondents were teachers prior to working as a school counselor, 95.4% were certified school counselors, and 73.2% graduated from a CACREP-accredited program. Participants work in diverse school settings including: rural ( $n = 72$ , 30.1%), small town ( $n = 57$ , 23.8%), suburban ( $n = 63$ , 36.4%), and urban ( $n = 47$ , 19.7%) and the majority work in public schools ( $n = 224$ , 93.7%) with few working in charter ( $n = 9$ , 3.8%) and magnet ( $n = 6$ , 2.5%) schools. Approximately 19% of school counselors endorsed that they worked in a Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) school (44.4% were unsure of RAMP status) and 60.7% work in Title I schools (3.8% were unsure of Title I status). The average number of school

counselors per school was 2.27 ( $SD = 1.7$ , Range = 1-10) with an average estimated number of students per school of 828 ( $SD = 629.8$ , Range = 90-3,300).

### **Instrumentation**

The authors utilized three open-ended questions to obtain information about Texas school counselors' lived experiences related to girls' leadership: In your role as a school counselor, how do you promote girls' leadership in your school? In what ways did your counseling program/training prepare you to promote girls' leadership in the school? What is your role in assessing the effectiveness of girls' leadership programs in the school? These questions were part of a larger study that included a survey regarding girls' leadership development programs and services in Texas secondary schools. The survey results are not a part of this particular research. The three qualitative questions utilized in this qualitative research were developed by a five-member research team (two school counselors with combined 22 years of experience in the schools and three licensed professional counselors with experience counseling and research with girls and teens). Feedback on the full survey, including the open-ended qualitative questions, was provided by five currently practicing school counselors from different areas of Texas.

### **Data Analysis**

Before examining the participants' responses, the authors bracketed preconceived notions and biases about the phenomenon to be receptive to what was presented in the data (Moustakas, 1994). The researchers were all women who were interested in women's specific counseling issues, leadership, and particularly how girls' leadership could impact women in leadership positions. Each researcher expressed hope that girls' leadership programming and services were provided widely, yet there was worry that there may be barriers to providing those programs and services. Two researchers have experience in schools as school counselors. Two researchers have

completed coursework in women's specific issues. One of them completed a certificate in Women and Gender Studies concurrent with her PhD and has created a course in counseling women and girls. Initial perspectives and assumptions were discussed and bracketed to allow for the least biased view of the data before data analysis began. Phenomenology is as much a philosophy as a methodology (Carspecken, 1999; Dowling, 2007) yet methodology, trustworthiness, and rigor are what guide phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013; Flynn & Korcuska, 2018).

Independently, each author examined the responses to the open-ended questions. Although phenomenological research typically involves in depth data from few participants, phenomenology can be done with written responses as well (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). This research involved shorter responses but from many participants, resulting in a plethora of qualitative data to engage with. The researchers reviewed participant responses for both breadth and depth of information and the research team determined that the responses were complex and interesting enough for coding and thematic work. The authors engaged in a horizontalization process wherein they treated each participant statement with equal value and omitted statements that were irrelevant to the inquiry, repetitive, or overlapping (Hays & Singh, 2012). From the remaining statements, meaning units or codes were derived (Wertz, 2005). Through a series of meetings, the authors discussed each code and created a code book of the textural descriptions of the participants' experiences (Patton, 2002). The codes were then clustered into themes (Moustakas, 1994) and further enhanced through structural descriptions, or the variant conditions in which the phenomenon was experienced (Hays & Singh, 2012). Synthesis was achieved when textural and structural descriptions were combined to convey the essence of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994) and when the authors reached agreement on themes and subthemes. To ensure consensus and consistency with meaning of the codes, the researchers each

coded 50 responses separately, then came together to reach consensus about the codes established and what each meant. The team members then each coded 50 more responses before meeting again to discuss any new codes that emerged and the potential need to change the codes. Researchers discussed each code and how it was utilized until consensus was reached. To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, the entire process was exhaustively documented and reviewed by the research team. Additionally, the entire process and documents were audited by a reviewer that was not a member of the research team. The auditor was a graduate level research assistant who had previous experience with qualitative data and with auditing. No concerns or errors were found during the auditing process. Bracketing, reflexivity, and auditing, as used in this research, are some of the main trustworthiness procedures utilized in phenomenological research (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018).

## **Findings**

Through the process of reaching consensus, the research team discovered four overarching themes. The four themes that emerged were: (a) Formal Approach to Girls' Leadership, (b) Informal Approach to Girls' Leadership, (c) No Girls' Leadership, and (d) Non-Gender Specific Approach to Girls' Leadership. Each theme is related to and comes out of the research question, which was, "What are school counselors' lived experiences with girls' leadership in their schools, their training to deliver girls' leadership programming, and their assessment of that programming?"

### **Formal Approach to Girls' Leadership**

The theme, "Formal Approach to Girls' Leadership" describes: a) explicit recognition that girls' leadership development is a relevant area to focus on, and b) a more intentional, focused (i.e., formal) approach to addressing girls' leadership in schools. Participants reported formal,

intentional focus on girls' leadership in three areas: counselor training, interventions, and assessment. These areas were also subthemes and each is described with a focus on using participants' words.

**Formal girls' leadership training.** Some participants reported that their school counselor training programs directly and intentionally addressed the topic of girls' leadership. Participants who reported that their programs' addressed girls' leadership did so in a variety of areas such as specific classes, class discussions, and clinical projects. Classes such as, "classes on diversity" and a "leadership class" were named as providing information on girls' leadership. One participant reported training in, "a Girls and Women class in my grad program which prepared me to recognize and address issues common among adolescent and school aged girls, especially as a mental health professional/school counselor." Not only did classes help participants to learn about girls and leadership, participants also learned "through class projects and lectures as well as conferences." Another participant reported learning about girls' leadership through, "reading and discussions specifically on societal obstacles that hinder female leadership development." Yet, another participant focused on a clinical field experience and noted that her program, "prepared me for girl[s'] leadership by making me lead a teen girls group that focused on leadership during my internship." Though the delivery varied, these participants reported having an intentional focus on girls' leadership in their counseling programs and training. This intentional focus led one participant to tie her training to her work as a school counselor providing girls' leadership programming saying:

I believe my counseling program/training prepared me to promote girls' leadership in school [by] identifying characteristics common between school-age girls. In addition,

being instructed on the importance of social emotional maturity played an integral part in my creating both the girls mentor program as well as the peer mediation program.

**Formal girls' leadership interventions.** Participants who reported formal girls' leadership programming did so through classroom-based lessons, small groups, internally and externally created girls' leadership programs, and mentoring programs. One participant reported, "piloting a girls' summit this year to help encourage leadership traits in our students." Another said that at their school, "we hosted a girl's empowerment conference this year and we have partnered with an outside counseling agency to come in for the spring." Another participant has, "run small groups every year to empower young women to make the best choices and focus on areas they can shine as leaders." Though the forms of the girls' leadership interventions varied, the intentional focus of girls' leadership was present for participants.

**Intentional assessment of girls' leadership.** Many participants also approached the assessment of girls' leadership programs formally as, "observer and data gathering", through "surveys", and a "rubric to determine effectiveness." Other participants stated: "My role in assessing the effectiveness of our girls' leadership program in the school is the collection and dissemination of data (program growth/retention of participants, academic performance updates to mentors, disciplinary feedback to mentors, as well as faculty/staff meetings)." These participants reported ongoing assessment of the girls' leadership programming that they either lead or support. Other participants described intentional assessment, albeit less formal, such as "I am constantly monitoring the progress of the girls. I also talk individually with the girls to have them self-evaluate their own progress".

The theme "Formal Approach to Girls' Leadership" encompasses the recognition that school counselors have the need for and recognize the importance of girls-specific leadership

development and that they received formal training on the topic in their counseling programs, provide intentional girls' leadership programming, as well as formally assessing programming provided. This formal and intentional approach to girls' leadership is in contrast to other themes that highlight an informal approach, no approach, or a non-gender specific approach to girls' leadership.

### **Informal Approach to Girls' Leadership**

In contrast with the more structured, intentional approach of some participants, others reported their efforts with girls' leadership programs, experience with training, and assessment of girls' leadership programs as less structured or informal; thus, we identified the theme, "Informal Approach to Girls' Leadership". The theme's three subthemes are: (a) informal girls' leadership training, (b) encourage involvement in leadership, and (c) informal role with assessments.

**Informal girls' leadership training.** Some participants reported that girls' leadership was addressed informally in their school counselor training programs. One participant stated that, "Although I did not have a course or assignment specific to girls' leadership, I did have the opportunity, through my secondary school counseling course, to identify a need on campus and create a program to address that need." Some participants reported experiences and information in their training programs that helped them with girls' leadership though it wasn't focused on that topic. Some of those experiences included, "small groups and classes that promoted developing the whole child" and "general principles of encouraging and assisting students to be successful and reach their full potential." One participant noted a focus on girls' specific concerns stating, "There was an emphasis on low self-esteem and lack of confidence that girls experience at this level" without reporting the impact on leadership. One participant summed up this indirect or informal approach to training through reporting that they, "discussed social aspects of a child,

hierarchy of needs and solution focused counseling which indirectly prepared me to address girls' leadership." Though some participants reported that their informal training allowed them to apply needed skills to the area of girls' leadership, the reported lack of focus and intention left the researchers with questions about how their training could be applied to providing leadership programming for girls.

**Encourage involvement in leadership.** Some participants reported an informal role in supporting girls' leadership programming. An informal role in girls' leadership often took the form of encouraging and facilitating involvement and, "Providing opportunities in the school community as well as outside the campus." Another participant stated that, "I promote leadership by encouraging girls to be as involved as possible in leadership activities." Several reported encouraging girls' leadership stating that they, "Encourage girls to seek leadership roles," or more specifically "encourage girls to seek leadership roles in Student Council, FFA [Future Farmers of America], and National Honor Society." School counselors also mentioned that they encouraged leadership by serving as role models such as, "I provide leadership by role modeling, providing guidance, etc."

**Informal role with assessments.** A less structured role with assessing girls' leadership involved, "Making sure to create an environment where girls feel that they have power and opportunities to become the leaders they want to be." Other participants stated they assess, "through informal evaluation," and through, "informal input and guidance." One participant shared a focus on girls' leadership through informal assessment stating, "We observe, guide and assist with all leadership and pay particular attention to building future female leaders."

An informal approach to girls' leadership programming and assessment leaves one to wonder about the ability of such programs to meet the needs of all students (i.e., all girls in schools)

and the efficacy of such programs when they are utilized. Yet despite the informal approach that many participants reported, girls' leadership is being addressed in some way in those schools and training programs. This also reflects that participants recognize the relevance of girls' leadership, even if their training, programming, and assessment was less formal. Other schools and training programs reported not addressing or focusing on girls' leadership at all.

### **No Girls' Leadership**

The theme, "No Girls' Leadership" showcases the phenomenon of girls' leadership through absence, rather than presence (Carspecken, 1999). "No Girls' Leadership" describes the experience of many participants who reported receiving no information about girls' leadership in their training programs, conducting no girls' leadership programming, and doing no assessment of girls' leadership programming. Included in the subthemes, (a) no girls' leadership training, (b) no girls' leadership programming, and (c) no girls' leadership assessment, were participants who did not receive any training in their school counselor preparation programs, participants who were not involved in providing or supporting girls' leadership programming, and participants who were not involved in assessing girls' leadership programs. An additional subtheme, "Barriers to girls' leadership", encompasses responses from participants who indicated no participation in girls' leadership programming or assessment but cited barriers that prevented their participation.

**No girls' leadership training.** There were participants who reported receiving no information or training in girls' leadership from their counselor training programs. Participants who did not receive training in promoting girls' leadership had responses that varied from, "none", to "it didn't", to "There was no focus on girl's leadership", and even "There wasn't anything girl specific." One participant noted that their, "program was not helpful at all" and another stated, that their, "Training was not ever gender specific."

**No girls' leadership programming.** Some participants reported not participating in or providing any girls' leadership programming. One participant saw no need for girls' leadership to be promoted stating, "I don't feel that I have to promote it. I don't see a big issue with girls not stepping into leadership roles any more/less than boys." Other participants stated, "I don't feel I promote it at all" or simply, "I don't" with no further explanation.

**No girls' leadership assessment.** Some participants also noted that they have no role in assessing girls' leadership programs with many participants responding with, "none" and one stating, "We do not assess any programs we have." Some participants note that they are not involved in assessing girls' leadership programs because, "At this time, I am not specifically focused on girl's leadership" and "We have no girls' leadership programs." This subtheme was surprising given ASCA (2012) requirements related to program assessment.

**Barriers to girls' leadership.** Though some participants reported not being involved in girls' leadership at all with little or no explanation, some participants cited barriers that kept them from providing more girls' leadership programming and/or assessing girls' leadership programming. The subtheme of, "Barriers to girls' leadership" describes participants' awareness of the importance of girls' leadership programming and things that prevent them from conducting the needed programming. Participants reported barriers to both providing and assessing girls' leadership programming. Lack of time and resources were the two main barriers cited related to both providing and assessing girls' leadership programming.

Respondents noted heavy caseloads as contributing to lack of time. For example, one respondent reported, "I have over 550 students so I don't have time to do extra things [that] I want to." Other participants mentioned their many, varied roles and responsibilities prevent them from having time to do all they would like to do to promote girls' leadership. One respondent stated, "I

have a heart for a focus on girls' leadership activities, but [am] embarrassed to say that I do not have enough time to make it a focus. I am weighed down with providing academic responsibilities and responsive counseling." Another commented, "Unfortunately, my role on my campus is primary academics counselor, which leave[s] very little time for other programs." Another stated, "Honestly I have [so] many jobs I am assigned I do not do this as much as I should." Still another stated, "I am only one person with many hats." Relatedly, some respondents reported being too busy with student crises to tend to girls' leadership promotion, as relayed by one participant, "As the crisis counselor, I do not do much in this area, but I should do more." These responses by participants indicate that some school counselors who have an awareness of the need for girls' leadership promotion and a desire to do more in that area find themselves unable to do so due to barriers such as time and resources. This lack of time extended to assessing girls' leadership as well with one participant noting involvement in assessment, "by observation only at present. I would like to have more time and resources."

The theme, "No Girls' Leadership" described not only a lack of involvement, it also included the reasons that many participants were unable to be involved. For training programs, there was not much explanation offered due to the participants' lack of knowledge, however, time and resources seemed to be the major barriers for their own lack of provision of girls' leadership and lack of assessment. Heavy caseloads, which could arguably be included in a lack of time and resources, and many other responsibilities were also cited as barriers. The other explanation provided, that did not fit with barriers, was the lack of perceived need for girls' leadership programming because girls are leaders as often as boys in that school, which may fit more with the next theme.

## **Non-Gender Specific Approach to Promoting Girls' Leadership**

The theme, “Non-Gender Specific Approach to Promoting Girls' Leadership” included many variations of the message that girls can receive leadership programming with boys and do not need separate programming specific to their needs regarding leadership. This theme was noted in the focus of counselor training programs and in the promotion of girls' leadership programming by school counselors themselves. Several participants indicated that they were trained to promote leadership evenly to boys and girls and did not focus on promoting girls' leadership specifically. Regarding training, some noted that training was not specific to one gender but was generalized to and “inclusive” of all students. Participants noted, “there was not much focus on one gender over another” and “that wasn't discussed as much as creating a sense of well-being in all students.” For some, if leadership promotion was discussed as targeted at a specific demographic, it was discussed through a multicultural lens not specific to gender. For example, when describing their preparation for girls' leadership promotion, some participants described being prepared in their graduate courses through “diversity” classes, as previously mentioned, and being trained for the inclusion of all students and “supporting minority populations.”

In terms of actively promoting girls' leadership in schools, whether it was through guidance lessons, small groups, or individual interactions, some participants reportedly encouraged leadership equally to all students. The rationale for their non-gender specific approach varied. For example, one participant reported that it was her job to “promote an environment that all are equal and that opportunities are available to all.” Another participant noted, “I don't know if separating girls and boys is really necessary. Sometimes excluding one group for the purpose of building up another one has minimal effect. . .So, to answer the question, I don't guide/advise/promote differently with girls than I do with boys.”

Another participant shared that girls in school do not take on leadership roles any less than boys and therefore do not need gender specific support or programming in leadership. Other participants implied that their focus on opportunities and college/career readiness was appropriate for all students; therefore, targeting girls through leadership programming was not done. For example, one participant shared “I encourage girls and boys to get leadership experience whether it be in sports, extra-curricular activities, or in the classroom” suggesting all genders are equally encouraged toward leadership in school-related activities. Another explained, that she promotes leadership in a manner “not specific for one gender over the other. I do a lot of college-focused events that are [applicable] for both populations.”

In summary, many participants relayed students’ leadership needs to be non-gender specific. Some participants provided the rationale that they were trained to promote leadership to all students equally. Others noted that they did not see the need to focus on girls’ leadership specifically given that girls were taking as much initiative as boys in pursuing leadership roles and many opportunities (i.e., extracurricular activities, sports, college/career readiness) were applicable to all students. Participants in the current study pointed out that they are tasked with meeting the specific needs of their campus and have been trained to provide these needs in an all-inclusive manner. However, it is imperative that school counselors balance their foundational training and observations (e.g., equity in girls’ representation in leadership positions in their schools) with information from the literature and best practices (e.g., gender inequity exists, leadership is more appealing to girls when it is presented as empowering and relational; Baric et al., 2009) to maximize their reach and impact on girls in their schools.

Each of these themes relates back to the research question by highlighting the various ways that school counselors experience and interact with girls’ leadership through their counselor

training, their programming, and the way they assess what they do. Participants self-selected to participate based on knowledge that they would be asked about girls' leadership programming and services. Though much phenomenological research deals with the presence of a phenomenon, even its absence, such as is seen in the theme No Girls' Leadership, can add information about the phenomenon (Carspecken, 1999).

### **Discussion**

Leadership skills are important for all women, regardless of career or leadership aspirations (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017), and critical for those seeking to break into positions that continue to be dominated by men (Baric et al., 2009). Though girls' leadership programs have increased in number, their use in schools is unclear. Because school counselors are called on to ensure gender equity through their programming (ASCA, 2014), to assess the services they provide (ASCA, 2012), and to be capable to do those things (CACREP 2016), investigating their experiences with girls' leadership was warranted. Through phenomenological research with secondary school counselors utilizing the research question "What are school counselors lived experiences with girls' leadership in their schools, their training to deliver girls' leadership programming, and their assessment of that programming?", the team discovered four themes that defined their experiences with girls' leadership: (a) Formal Approach to Girls' Leadership, (b) Informal Approach to Girls' Leadership, (c) No Girls' Leadership, and (d) Non-Gender Specific Approach to Girls' Leadership. These themes cut across the focus areas of the research, which were preparation for girls' leadership in their counseling training, promoting girls' leadership in their schools, and assessment of girls' leadership programming.

The formal, intentional approach to girls' leadership in counselor training, girls' leadership programming, and assessment of girls' leadership, included participants who recognized the

importance of gender specific leadership training as recommended in the literature (Haber-Curren & Sulpizio, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2015). Participants who reported an intentional focus on girls' leadership relayed utilizing mentoring programs and role modeling which is mirrored in the literature (e.g., Haber-Curren & Sulpizio, 2017). Interestingly, participants who reported an informal approach to leadership also relayed utilizing mentoring and role modeling as a tool in girls' leadership development.

Regarding the second theme, Informal Approach to Girls' Leadership, it could be construed that any attempt to deliver girls' specific leadership programming is acknowledgement that the topic is important. A lack of formal, intentional girls' leadership programming in schools, however, does not guarantee that all girls are receiving leadership skills and opportunities at the same level. An informal approach to girls' leadership in counselor training programs also does not guarantee that all school counseling students are receiving the same information and it does not do justice to the complexity of delivering girls-specific leadership training (Baric, 2013; Haber-Curren & Sulpizio, 2017). Further, informal assessment of girls' leadership programming does not consistently allow for progress to be shown in building leadership skills or a need for a change in programming.

The third and fourth themes, No Girls' Leadership and a Non-Gender Specific Approach to Promoting Girls' Leadership are both potentially problematic for girls' leadership development, albeit in different ways. This lack of training in girls' leadership delivery, support of girls' leadership programming, and/or assessment of programming was evident despite the scholars that indicated girls' need a gender specific focus in leadership (e.g., Baric, 2013; Haber-Curren & Sulpizio, 2017). For some school counselors there was an awareness of the need for girls-specific leadership programming despite not receiving the training while others cited barriers (e.g., time

and resources) that prevented them from delivering programming. The lack of assessment reported by some participants is in opposition to recommendations that school counselors collect data on their services and programs (ASCA, 2012). This lack of assessment is also in opposition to training recommendations by CACREP (2016). Though some lack of assessment could be explained by not graduating from an accredited program, the majority of the participants in this research (73.2%) reported that their program was accredited by CACREP.

Specifically, the theme *Non-Gender Specific Approach to Promoting Girls' Leadership*, seemed to reject the idea that gender specific initiatives are needed. The participants who endorsed this idea preferred gender- neutral leadership programming and some even saw that as an issue of equality. Equality, providing the same thing to everyone, is different from equity, providing resources based on need. ASCA (2015) called on school counselors to provide gender equity in programming, which would be met through gender specific leadership training. Despite concern for the leaking pipeline of girls' and women's leadership (Hyde, 2014) and recommendations for girls' focused leadership training, some participants in this study reported not being aware of or seeing the need for girls' specific leadership training. Some even said that girls' specific programming would exclude boys. This is despite a wealth of evidence that men take on leadership roles in greater numbers than women (CAWP, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) and that both girls and women benefit from gender specific leadership development (Brue & Brue, 2016; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Haber-Curren & Sulpizio, 2017). It is, therefore, necessary that school counselors provide gender equitable leadership training and that counselor education programs prepare school counseling students to deliver and assess that programming.

## **Implications and Recommendations for School Counselors and Counselor Educators**

Despite the profession's awareness of the need for, and responsibility to offer gender equitable programming (ASCA, 2012; 2015), study participants reported barriers to engaging in that work (i.e., time and resources), a lack of training to do so, and a lack of support. Though the cited barriers can be tied to complex educational funding and priorities, administrative awareness may help with support for girls' specific programming. School counselors are advocates for their positions as well as their students (ASCA, 2012) and this is an area of needed advocacy due to the barriers reported by participants. To advocate for their roles, school counselors and professional associations could appeal to legislators to increase the number of school counselors in schools, ensure that school counselors are doing counseling related activities (including providing gender specific leadership programming), and have the resources necessary for providing programming to all students.

In addition to providing girls' specific leadership programming, school counselors need to assess and collect data on the programs they provide (ASCA, 2012). Some participants reported not being involved in assessing their girls' leadership programming due to some of the same barriers that prevent programming (i.e., time and resources). Increasing school counselors' assessment of their leadership programs could be addressed through advocacy efforts to increase support and reduce barriers. Training in counselor education programs as recommended by CACREP (2016) could also help with efficacy in assessment and advocacy. Counselor education programs can infuse assessment training in classes specific to assessment, research, and school counseling. This would provide multiple ways to understand and apply assessment in schools.

School counselors need to be prepared to deliver and support girls' leadership programming. According to our participants, many school counselors did not receive specific

training from their counselor education programs in girls' leadership development among the school age population. Continuing without girls-specific leadership training (i.e., the status quo) may result in the same historical gendered inequities in leadership. Similarly, without addressing biases against women in more prestigious and powerful positions, girls may be thwarted from pursuing more varied careers (Shapiro et al., 2015). To address areas of continued gender inequity in leadership (CAWP, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; Warner, 2014) and increase their focus on girls' and women, school counseling training programs could offer a gender specific class such as a counseling women class, even as an elective. Counselor education programs could also ensure that gender inequities are addressed within other classes such as a multicultural class, a career class, or in school counseling specific classes. A focus on gender inequities would be an admirable start, but to address girls' leadership specifically, a focus on gender, leadership, and related skills (e.g., voice assertion) is needed.

For practicing school counselors to promote girls' leadership, there may be a need for ongoing training. School districts, through their service centers, or conferences may provide ongoing opportunities for post-graduate training in the area of girls' leadership. Regardless of training, school counselors should be providing gender equitable leadership training for girls (ASCA, 2015). Despite a prior lack of focus on girls' and leadership, the need remains to prepare girls and women for leadership and change the imbalance of gender in positions of leadership. Without a change at the school level to increase girls' leadership potential, we will continue to see the effects of the leaking pipeline of women's leadership (Hyde, 2014) with women not stepping into leadership roles at the same level as men.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

Though this phenomenological research offers some insight into school counselors' experiences with girls' leadership, there are some limitations. Participants who are less comfortable in an online environment (Burt, Gonzalez, Swank, Ascher, & Cunningham, 2011), may not have participated. Any systematic bias between respondents and non-respondents may have skewed the sample. Though there is less concern about transferability in qualitative research, the lack of diversity in our sample may not represent the perspective of the larger population of school counselors (i.e., men, ethnic minorities, or those from unaccredited programs). Future researchers should consider recruiting a more diverse, national sample and asking questions in other formats such as paper-and-pencil surveys or in-person interviews.

Additionally, based on the participating school counselors who reported not currently providing girls' specific leadership programming or services, there is a need to understand why. Many participants in this research who did not provide girls' specific leadership programming reported barriers. Future research could examine the barriers that prevent providing girls' leadership programming and ways to remove barriers to successful program implementation. Some of the barriers reported may not be recognized by participants as barriers such as a lack of understanding of the need for girls' specific leadership training. Future researchers could focus on the lack of understanding of equality versus equity and how that impacts the leadership attainment of girls.

Furthermore, there is a need for specific research on interventions that secondary school counselors have already implemented. Though many participants report implementing girls' specific leadership programming/services and assessing those services, that data is not readily available to researchers. Accessing the data that school counselors are already collecting or

working with school counselors to collect data on their girls' leadership programming would provide much needed information about how to create and implement successful interventions.

### **Conclusion**

Though there are limitations, this research adds to the information currently available about how school counselors experience, perceive, and implement girls' leadership programming. Because school counselors focus on student development and school wide programming (ASCA, 2012), they are ideally positioned to provide girls' leadership interventions. The themes discovered: (a) Formal Approach to Girls' Leadership, (b) Informal Approach to Girls' Leadership, (c) No Girls' Leadership, and (d) Non-Gender Specific Approach to Girls' Leadership, may indicate that girls' leadership development needs are viewed in varied ways by school counselors. Schools that have no girls' leadership programs, with barriers or otherwise, and those that see no need to promote gender specific programming despite societal inequities, may be at odds with extant literature related to girls' leadership development and ASCA standards. Research is needed in the area of girls' leadership programming from the perspective of school counselors who are called on to provide gender equitable programming and who work directly with girls' development every day. Counselor educators as researchers can not only provided gender equitable training for school counselors but can partner with school counselors to conduct research on the programs being conducted in their schools.

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